

Model Paper

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4-line heading:
Name/Teacher/
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Langston Hughes and the Invention of the Blues Poem

Title (centered)

In their overview of the life and achievements of Langston Hughes, the editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* stress that Hughes had a special relationship with the Harlem Renaissance for two reasons. His poetry and other writings captured the spirit of the age, and his autobiography *The Big Sea* offered an unusually vivid first-person account of the renaissance (Gates and McKay 1251). The Harlem Renaissance, often dated to the period 1920–1935, also coincided with the Jazz Age and the exploding popularity of radio and recorded music. The recording industry, boosted by radio, brought pop music to the masses, and in the 1920s, this meant jazz. Hughes, born in 1902 and based in New York from young adulthood on, was well positioned to include aspects of this musical style in his poetry. In fact, one of Hughes's most original contributions to American literature was his invention of what may be called the blues poem—poetry reflecting the experience of pain.

Introductory
paragraph gives
overview of
Langston Hughes
and Harlem
Renaissance

Transitional
words

Thesis statement

Hughes in Harlem

Subhead

Langston Hughes arrived in New York in 1921. He later recalled, "I was in love with Harlem long before I got there. Had I been a rich young man, I would have bought a house in Harlem and built musical steps up to the front door, and installed chimes that at the press of a button played Ellington tunes" (Rampersad 51). His words reflect not just his love of a place, but also his love of a kind of music, as Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was one of the most influential jazz musicians of this time.

Attention-getting
quote underlines
the magic of both
Harlem and jazz
for Hughes

Although Harlem was a mixed neighborhood, it was already being called “the Negro capital of the world” (Berry 27). African American artists, writers, musicians, and entrepreneurs from all over the country were moving to this New York City neighborhood. Soon after Hughes settled in, he saw a performance of *Shuffle Along*, the brand-new black musical revue that at least one theater historian has credited with launching the Harlem Renaissance (Mitchell 76). Written, produced, and directed by blacks for black audiences, the show played more than 500 performances on Broadway. Hughes called it “swift, bright, funny . . . a honey of a show,” and said seeing it was the main reason he had wanted to go to New York’s Columbia University (Lewis, *Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 77).

Quotation embedded in a sentence, with parenthetical citation of source

By the 1920s, black music was enjoying explosive popularity, and the major reason was the appeal of the blues. With origins reaching back to the late 1800s, the blues made celebrities of black composers such as W. C. Handy and singers Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Although this musical form has resisted precise definition, Albert Murray, an African American literary and jazz critic, quotes the novelist Ralph Ellison’s description of the blues. The blues, said Ellison, “express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit” (202). Hughes himself referred to the bittersweet quality of this musical genre: “For as sad as Blues may be, there is always something humorous about them—even if it’s the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying” (quoted in Chinitz).

Topic sentence

Page reference only because author mentioned in text

The blues was a national phenomenon. However, Harlem was the nerve center of this music during the 1920s. Two venues, in particular, stood out. The first was the Cotton Club, so named in 1923, where, ironically, the musicians were black and the audiences were white. The great composer and band leader Duke Ellington played here. The second popular blues venue was the Savoy Ballroom, which opened in 1926. The African American artist

Quotation drawn from a secondary source

Second sentence functions as topic sentence, after transitional word *however*

Romare Bearden gives some idea of the exhilaration of singing the blues in his painting *The Blues* (1975), shown in Figure 1 below.

Last sentence introduces illustration and links it to text



Figure 1. Romare Bearden, *The Blues* (1975).

In 1925, the year before the Savoy opened, Alain Locke, a Harvard graduate who had become the first African American Rhodes scholar, published a landmark collection called *The New Negro*. This anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays, to which Hughes contributed, has often been called the official charter of the Harlem Renaissance because it boldly offered a blueprint for the significance of black culture. Hughes, however, took a more specific stance on the question of black art than did the more philosophical, conservative Locke. Whereas Locke envisioned assimilation, Hughes stressed a separate identity for African Americans. In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Hughes explained that true Negro art was racial art—art that dispensed with the “mountain,” a metaphor that

Paragraph contrasts Alain Locke with Langston Hughes

symbolized the obstacles and dangers of assimilation into a white world. Commenting on the evident fact that many of his own poems were “racial in theme and treatment,” Hughes had this to say about jazz:

Colon introduces long quote

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. (Lewis, *Harlem Renaissance Reader* 94–95)

Brief, one-sentence paragraph glosses quote and provides punchy closure to this section

What Hughes was describing, of course, was the blues.

Poetic Influences

Subhead

By his late teens and early twenties, Langston Hughes had absorbed a number of influences that would have a collective impact on his crafting of blues poetry. Three of the most important of these were Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay. In his biography of Hughes, Arnold Rampersad asserts that Whitman and Sandburg freed Hughes from “the tyranny of traditional forms” (29). These two poets’ free verse has a highly oral orientation; their poetry is as powerful when the lines are spoken aloud as when the words are read on the page. That would have appealed to the music-loving Hughes. In addition, Sandburg was an early adopter of jazz subjects such as improvised laments and lovers’ quarrels, and he had experimented with rhythmic syncopation (the shift of accent when a normally weak beat is stressed) and daring sound effects in poems like “Jazz Fantasia.”

Topic sentence

Author mentioned in text

Vachel Lindsay’s influence on Hughes, like that of Whitman and Sandburg, had a significantly oral dimension. One critic has described Lindsay as a “poetic singer” who fused poetry with chant and, like Hughes, “attempted to bring the artist, the poem, and the audience closer together” by uniting verse and performance (Tracy 142).

Quotation marks around phrases directly taken from the literary critic

Besides these white voices, Hughes had several important black precursors as well. The poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) represents a special case, since he seems to have served as a predominantly negative example for Hughes. Dunbar was probably the most celebrated African American writer of his generation, praised by blacks and whites alike. As early as the Harlem Renaissance, however, Dunbar seemed sentimental and stereotyped to some critics, who lampooned his language and his characters as riddled with clichés. For Hughes, Dunbar’s use of dialect in much of his verse suggested overtones of a “sideshow freak” (Lewis, *Harlem Renaissance Reader* 93). Hughes would also use dialect in his blues poems, but in an entirely different way, as we shall see in the analysis offered below.

Opening sentence serves as topic sentence here

Transitional words *however* and *also* provide coherence

In the early phase of the Harlem Renaissance, two of the most influential “Old Guard” black writers were W. E. B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson. Both men, along with Alain Locke, regarded the Negro spiritual as the true “folk gift” of black music. They thus tended to reject ragtime, blues, and jazz, arguing that these forms were not “serious music” forged in a more classical, or at least historical, tradition (Tracy 20–27).

Topic sentence

Johnson’s poetry, however, drew significantly on oral elements from the black church. For example, in poems such as “The Creation” (1920), he manipulated elements such as tempo, syncopation, and rhythmic stress with the virtuosity of a fluent, inspiring preacher delivering a sermon:

Details about Johnson establish his use of oral elements and his sympathy for the younger poet Hughes

And God stepped out on space,
And He looked around and said,
“I’m lonely—
I’ll make me a world.”

Johnson’s style must have impressed Hughes. The older poet was certainly sympathetic to the younger one’s verse. We know, for example, that Johnson read Hughes’s “The Weary Blues” aloud at a banquet held by *Opportunity* magazine in 1925 (Lewis, *Harlem Renaissance Reader* 256).

The Blues Poem

Subhead

In contrast to W. E. B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, Hughes believed emphatically, in the words of critic Edward Waldron, that the blues were “an integral part of Black American culture” and that they constituted a secular counterpart to the religious level of the spirituals (140–141). When he set out to shape blues poems, however, Hughes faced numerous challenges. Most obviously, a blues poem would have to evoke the stanza form of blues lyrics. The most common blues stanza is denoted as *AAB*, where the second line (called the repeat line) echoes the first, and the third line (called the response line) may expand, illuminate, or justify the first two, as in this example quoted by the scholar Steven C. Tracy (83):

Topic sentence firmly links Hughes to the subject of the blues

People, if you hear me humming on this song both
 night and day,
 People, if you hear me humming on this song both
 night and day,
 I’m just a poor boy in trouble trying to drive these
 blues away.

Parenthetical phrases provide explanation of stanza structure

The response line typically rhymes with the previous ones. A number of other stanza combinations are possible in blues lyrics—for example, *ABC* and *ABB*.

Aside from these formal aspects, Hughes had to reckon with the social connotations of the blues. Blues music was heavily identified with the working class, for example. This association suited Hughes, who was always skeptical about the trendiness of the Negro when Harlem was considered chic. Ironically, the Cotton Club, whose admission policies conformed to Jim Crow segregation, had turned away W. C. Handy himself while the band was playing his music (Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* 209). Blues lyrics also exhibited a fair amount of bawdy language, a feature that Hughes generally avoided in his poems (Tracy 196).

Topic sentence opens the paragraph

Finally, Hughes had to confront the tricky issue of dialect. On the one hand, he was determined not to lapse into what he

Topic sentence leads to explanation of why dialect was a “tricky issue”

regarded as the cute, superficial style of Paul Laurence Dunbar's embarrassingly dated slang for the sake of sounding "authentic." But there could be no denying that blues lyrics were phrased in the vernacular and that much of the setting and mood of the blues derived from its being voiced in the language of the people.

How did Hughes face these challenges? For an answer, let us turn to four "blues" lyrics, beginning with the poet's signature piece in this genre, "The Weary Blues," written when he was in his early twenties.

"The Weary Blues" (Hughes 50) was the title poem of Hughes's first volume of verse, published by Knopf in 1926. Consisting of only 35 lines, it has been called the first work by any poet to make use of the basic AAB blues stanza form (Gates and McKay 1252). There are two principal characters: the speaker/narrator, and the Negro jazzman, who performs on piano and sings the blues at an unidentified night spot on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. Here is how the poem begins:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway...
He did a lazy sway...
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

Syncopation has been regarded as one of the hallmarks of jazz and the blues. In these opening lines, Hughes manipulates rhythm to suggest this feature. For example, the passage begins in a falling, trochaic rhythm (a strong beat followed by a weak one: / -). Line 5 provides a transition, with three consecutive, strong stresses in the phrases "pale dull pallor" and "old gas light." By line 6, we have shifted to a rising, iambic rhythm (a weak beat followed by a strong one: - /). But something about "a

Paragraph begins with a rhetorical question

Details underline the importance of this poem

Colon introduces verse quotation

Paragraph presents a detailed analysis of the rhythm of the excerpt, tying the poem to syncopation in music

lazy sway” implies that the rhythm is hard to predict, and line 8, with its two anapestic feet (two weak beats followed by a strong one: - - /) bears out the implication.

The speaker in “The Weary Blues” quotes the performer twice, in lines 19–22 and 25–30. Both quotations use a moderate amount of dialect (as in “ain’t happy no mo’”), and both reproduce blues stanzas. Here is the second song of the bluesman:

“I got the Weary Blues
and I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”

Quotation marks signal that the person uttering these lines is not the main speaker of the poem

This is a blues AAB stanza, with each one of the three lines divided in half in order to form six lines of verse. Hughes uses dialect sparingly. In addition, in a technique that he employs often in his blues poems, he varies the repeat line so that it is not an exact repetition of the first line. The variation in this case is the omission of the pronoun *I* twice in the response line, adding complexity to the rhythm and an almost curt urgency to the performer’s emotion. The alteration also suggests the improvisation typical of live performance.

Steven C. Tracy, who has written extensively about Hughes and the blues, remarks that the blues unite the speaker and the performer in this poem (221). To appreciate the effects of music, dance, and oral recitation, the modern reader can do no better than turn to a brief video available on YouTube (“Poetry by Langston Hughes”).

Dependant clause in first sentence identifies the critic’s special area of interest

In “Homesick Blues” (Hughes 72), the poem’s final stanza employs a bold slant rhyme (“have”/“laughs”). The imperfect rhyme suggests the poem’s theme: the speaker’s urgent effort to fend off emotional distress and alienation.

Homesick blues, Lawd,
'S a terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth an' laughs.

Hughes effectively captures the despair of the blues in "Po' Boy Blues" (Hughes 83). In the first two stanzas, the speaker recalls his boyhood in the South, where "the sunshine seemed like gold" and he was a good boy who had never "done no wrong." But a disastrous love affair has ruined the speaker, who is now resigned to a weary world.

Writer combines a brief summary with words directly quoted from the poem

Finally, in the last stanza of "Out of Work" (Hughes 217), Hughes fuses the typical blues stanza with rhetorical questions and rhythm and syncopation to convey the anguish of unemployment during the Great Depression:

First sentence provides the rationale for this final excerpt

Did you ever try livin'
On two-bits minus two?
I say did you ever try livin'
On two-bits minus two?
Why don't you try it, folks,
And see what it would do to you?

These excerpts can give no more than a brief impression of the richness of Langston Hughes's blues poems. It is clear, however, that Hughes crafted his invention with tact and ingenuity. In turning to the blues for inspiration, Hughes achieved a distinctive cross-fertilization of literature and music during the Harlem Renaissance. The aftereffects of this achievement can be felt even today in the genres of performance poetry and poetry slams.

Concluding paragraph provides effective closure

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